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Sports Books for Christmas

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
December 15, 1993

Every Christmas the sports book becomes one of those items that people resort to as a last minute gift. But the sports book can be a thoughtful and excellent gift for sports fans and for those who simply like good books and good writing. This week I am recommending nine books which come from a list of nominees for an award as baseball book of the year. Next week I'll recommend several non-baseball books.

There are two biographies. Gerald Eskenazi's, *The Lip: A Biography of Leo Durocher*, is a well-written and entertaining volume on one of the most colorful players and managers of the century. Eskenazi captures the ego, insecurity, nastiness, and charm of this man who was once accused of stealing Babe Ruth's watch, and who late in life ran with Sinatra's rat pack.

Ed Linn's *Hitter: The Life and Turmoils of Ted Williams* captures all of the contradictions and color of Teddy Ballgame. Williams' battles with the press, his hitting prowess, his mother, his military record, his rivalry with DiMaggio are all part of an interesting and thorough picture of this marvelous player and personality of the national pastime. Linn's effort is worthy of the player.

In *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball*, Barbara Gregorich has meticulously researched another subject that has long been neglected in the history of the national pastime. As early as 1866 Vassar College had two women's baseball teams, and by the '90s women were playing professionally. Gregorich has produced a marvelous history that follows the story of women in the game, and the social and legal struggles surrounding them, into the late 20th century. She tells the story through the lives of specific women as well as women's teams and leagues, and in the process produces an excellent piece of baseball and gender history.

The Sporting News has in its archives some 8000 glass plate negatives of baseball photographs taken in the first forty years of this century by Charles M. Conlon. For the last several years these photos have been reproduced as baseball cards in the Conlon Collection from TSN, and now Neal and Constance McCabe have put together *Baseball's Golden Age: The Photographs of Charles M. Conlon*, a stunning collection of the work of this photographic artist. This coffee table book would be a wonderful

addition to the library of anyone interested in baseball or photography.

Two other coffee table books in the group of nine are The Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball edited by Lloyd Johnson and Miles Wolff, a collection of the league statistics of all minor leagues from 1902 to 1992, a bonanza for the obscure stat freak or minor league historian; and Michael Greshman's Diamonds: The Evolution of the Ballpark from Elysian Fields to Camden Yards. Greshman's book is an illustrated architectural history of the game, which examines the issues of preservation and tradition in baseball. The changing forces affecting ballpark design offer as good an insight into the history of baseball, sport, and American life as will be found anywhere.

Donald Hall's The Museum of Clear Ideas is the only poetry in the group. Hall has created a poem called "Baseball" which has nine sections or innings, each having nine stanzas, each stanza with nine lines, and each line with nine syllables. Another poem called "Extra Innings" takes the pattern through the twelfth inning increasing the number scheme in each inning. Beyond the form, the content is haunting as Hall is able to weave baseball into and out of the fabric of his life, as one finds baseball in the mind associated in sometimes odd ways with memories of people and places, some pleasant some not, which together constitute defining moments in a life. Some things can be done only with poetry.

Wilfred Sheed's essays collected in My Life As a Fan, trace how he became a fan as a child as well as the role baseball played for him as an immigrant. Sheed explains how his love affair with the game changed as he moved to adulthood and in the process Sheed demonstrates his power as a writer, and recreates one perspective on the history of the Dodgers.

Finally there is Friday's With Red a marvelous tribute to Red Barber put together by National Public Radio's Bob Edwards, the host of "Morning Edition." Millions who never knew Barber as a radio baseball and sports reporter came to love him as Red, the man from Tallahassee, who could wax eloquent about the camellias or the sports issues of the day in his Friday morning conversations with Edwards. Barber's life is a history of sports broadcasting, and Edward's tribute recreates many of the magical Friday morning moments. It is a treasure for those who listened faithfully on Friday, and a chance for those who didn't to get a taste of what they missed.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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